



TO: Deans, Chancellors, ACGE members, CCML members
FROM: Levon T. Esters, PhD
DATE: October 5, 2023
RE: SCOTUS & Graduate Application Admissions process

Dear Colleagues,

I hope this message finds you well. I would like to provide you with an important update regarding changes and next steps in our Graduate Application Admissions process following the recent Supreme Court decision.

Phase One: The Graduate Application

In the past, The Graduate School has worked closely with our college/department/program partners to offer boutique-styled services for The Graduate School's Application for Admission. Programs have had the flexibility to customize program-specific prompts within the Graduate Admission Decision System (GRADS) to align with their diversity goals.

However, in light of the Supreme Court's decision, we are conducting a thorough review of the prompts used by our graduate programs in an effort to comply with law. Any prompts that may violate the Court's decision by prioritizing race in admissions decisions are no longer permissible. The Graduate School will provide guidance through questions provided by the Office of General Counsel (OGC), for use by programs on the graduate application.

Effective Monday, September 18, programs no longer have direct access to add, edit, or remove program-specific prompts within GRADS. Instead, programs should request prompt modifications by emailing GradAppProgramQuestions@psu.edu. We will review these requests before implementing changes within GRADS to ensure their compliance with federal law. This interim review process will be in effect until we establish a more streamlined approval process.

While we will continue to collect demographic data on all applicants, the June 29, 2023, Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS) determined that the use of race in admissions is unconstitutional. Thus, mandating that an applicant's demographic information, including race and ethnicity, must not appear in applications systems (i.e., GRADS) moving forward. We understand that this process may pose challenges for colleges in assessing their applicant pool. To address this, we will collaborate with the Advisory Committee for Graduate Education (ACGE) and College Council of Multicultural Leaders (CCML) to provide access to demographic reports and data.

Phase Two and Phase Three: Long-Term Vision

Phase Two involves the requirement for all departments/programs to appoint, at minimum, three faculty members to admissions committees responsible for reviewing graduate applications. This step aims to ensure a fair and holistic approach to admissions.

In Phase Three, The Graduate School, in collaboration with partners from the CCML and ACGE, plans to reconstitute the ACGE/CCML working groups on graduate education. These groups will support ongoing education and provide workshops for graduate faculty and staff members. These workshops should equip them with the necessary information and tools to recruit diverse students effectively, while complying with changes in the law. The working groups will plan and develop these workshops or identify facilitators to see that departments/programs can implement holistic review strategies, including the development of rubrics and tools.

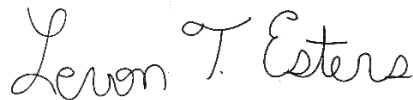
An outline of all steps the Graduate School plans to take to adjust to the SCOTUS ruling follows on the next two pages of this memo.

We understand that these changes may bring challenges, and we are committed to working closely with the appropriate campus partners to create a seamless transition and uphold the principles of diversity and inclusion in our admissions process.

If you have any questions or need further clarification on any of these updates, please feel free to reach out to me. Your partnership and cooperation are invaluable as we navigate these changes together.

Thank you for your continued commitment to excellence in graduate education at Penn State University.

Sincerely,



Levon T. Esters, PhD
Vice Provost for Graduate Education and
Dean of the Graduate School

cc
Justin Schwartz
Troy Ott
Cindy Reed

Graduate School Admissions Updates Following June 29, 2023 Supreme Court Decision

It is essential to establish a clear strategy and actionable steps to assist academic units and departments in addressing the recent Supreme Court ruling regarding graduate school admissions. Below, we present the outlined strategy and forthcoming steps aimed at helping ensure a seamless transition for academic units and departments.

Strategies

1. Internal Legal Consultation

- a. Work with the OGC to thoroughly analyze the Supreme Court ruling and its implications for our graduate admissions policies.
- b. Summarize the key points and requirements set by the ruling.
- c. Maintain an ongoing relationship with OGC to ensure continued compliance with the ruling and promptly address any legal challenges.

2. Review Current Admissions Policies

- a. Engage academic units and departments in a collaborative effort to revise admissions policies as needed.
- b. Identify any elements that may conflict with the Supreme Court ruling or require adjustment for greater clarity.
- c. Ensure that academic unit and departmental policies prioritize diversity, equity, and inclusion while complying with the SCOTUS ruling.

3. Education and Awareness

- a. Develop a comprehensive education program to inform admissions committees, faculty, and staff about the ruling, its significance, and potential biases to avoid.
- b. Ensure all graduate education partners understand the importance of fair and inclusive admissions.
- c. Collaborate with CCML and ACGE to create a more inclusive environment.

4. Evaluation of Holistic Admissions Criteria

- a. Assess the current criteria across academic units and departments for evaluating applicants holistically.
- b. Ensure that criteria align with the ruling's requirements for a compliant admissions process.

5. Data Collection and Transparency

- a. Implement data collection mechanisms to track the demographics of admitted students.
- b. Share this data transparently within the university community to demonstrate commitment to equity.

6. Regular Audits, Compliance Checks, and Periodic Reporting

- a. Establish a compliance team responsible for regular audits of admissions processes.
- b. Ensure that these audits are thorough, impartial, and in line with legal requirements.

- c. Establish a reporting system to periodically update university leadership and stakeholders on the progress and impact of these initiatives.

7. Continuous Improvement

- a. Encourage a culture of continuous improvement and adaptation to evolving legal standards and innovations in graduate admissions.

Immediate Next Steps

1. Convene a Graduate School committee responsible for interpreting the Supreme Court ruling's specific implications for our university's graduate admissions.
2. Begin a comprehensive review of admissions policies and criteria, focusing on alignment with the ruling's requirements.
3. Provide workshops on implicit bias and compliance with the ruling for all relevant stakeholders.
4. Develop a clear timeline for implementing changes and reforms to graduate admissions policies.
5. Establish channels for collecting feedback and suggestions from the university community.
6. Monitor progress regularly and make adjustments as needed.
7. Stay informed about legal developments and be prepared to adapt strategies accordingly.
8. Communicate updates and progress timely and transparently to all university stakeholders.